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Scottish Literature and New Media

Alan Riach

First of all, there's old media: newspapers and magazines. The American poet Ed Dorn used to run a paper of political-intellectual journalism called "Rolling Stock" in Reagan's America which, he said, was just about the only place where Marxist ideas could be published for a wider readership than specialists. Every issue's first page ran a banner title headline with an Old West locomotive coming straight at the reader with the strapline: "If it moves – print it!"

Magazines, journals, periodicals of different kinds in different historical epochs, have been an essential part of literary and political culture internationally. Scotland's literature has been vitally nourished by such publications and by literary journalism in newspapers. The early 19th-century rivals, the Tory "Blackwood's Magazine" and the Whig "Edinburgh Review" are famous examples, and in the 20th century, The Scottish Chapbook, The Scottish Nation, The Scottish Educational Journal, The Modern Scot, The Voice of Scotland, Lines Review, Chapman and many others were constantly engaged in literary and cultural debates, where contemporary events and new publications were analysed and discussed, new poems and fiction were published, and writers could set out their wares.

In 21st-century Scotland, new technology brings different possibilities yet the key questions remain: whose interests are being served? How does the technology help? What are its liabilities?

Let me offer three different examples of valuable Scottish literary practice in new media, and then a fourth value.

Three e-publications suggest three very different forms of practice. The online journal Glasgow Review of Books: <https://glasgowreviewofbooks.com/about/> effectively does what a published, paper-dependent magazine would do. Its technology isn't tree-based but computer-reliant. Its "Home Page" tells us: "The Glasgow Review of Books is a review journal publishing short and long reviews, review essays and interviews, as well as translations, fiction, poetry, and visual art. We are interested in all forms of cultural practice and seek to incorporate more marginal, peripheral or neglected forms into our debates and discussions."

The emphases are on an international approach, the importance of translation, and the Glasgow base. Currently, the magazine is structured around "threads": every fortnight new

poetry is published; there's "Translation Thursday" with reviews of translated work or new translations; and short fiction is also published regularly. There are reviews of books and literary festivals. Other "threads" include ecology (using visual images as well as poetry and criticism). Since the Review is unfunded, the online format makes the material both widely accessible and cost-effective.

I contributed in 2015, when there was a retrospective reassessment of "Informationism", twenty-one years after the "Informationist Primer" anthology Contraflow on the Superhighway. The poet who gave the group its name, Richard Price, wrote: "One of the features of Informationist poetry is its engagement with and deliberate mixing of different linguistic registers, and the interrogation of language's power-bearing qualities in the process."

That question of power, the interconnectedness and limitations of the "information society" we inhabit today, was what concerned us, I think, most intuitively, back in the 1980s and especially the 1990s. The most famous recent manifestation of our concerns is in Paul Mason's book, *Postcapitalism* (2015): "Information is different from every previous technology. Its spontaneous tendency is to dissolve markets, destroy ownership and break down the relationship between work and wages. And that is the deep background to the crisis we are living through."

Online resources are essential to that crisis, and maybe, its resolution. Our Scottish literary precedents were pre-eminently the late, epic, quotation-filled poems of Hugh MacDiarmid and the referentially wide-ranging poems of Edwin Morgan.

If the GRB is an online equivalent of a print-based periodical, even as it makes use of new technology to help with dissemination and cost, a different enterprise is evident with Brian Johnstone's *Scotia Extremis* website: <https://scotiaextremis.wordpress.com/>

Johnstone explains: "It's a long time since I was last called an extremist – not since my student days, in fact – but from Burns Day this year I've been happy to consider myself as such, though entirely in the cause of poetry. For on that date the Perthshire-based poet Andy Jackson and myself launched a new poetry project, the online anthology *Scotia Extremis*." The idea was to publish "writing by a wide range of Scottish poets – from the well-known to almost the yet-to-be discovered": "poems from the polarities of Scotland's psyche".

Taking their cue from Hugh MacDiarmid (“I’ll ha’e nae hauf-way hoose, but aye be whaur extremes meet”) the aim was to explore “the soul of Scotland” through specially commissioned poems. In Johnstone’s words: “Each week the editors publish a brace of themed poems with a particular Scottish focus: people (past and present), places (real and imagined), culture (high and low), customs (ancient and modern) and more.” While the list represents the editors’ interests they’re also addressing what they see as objectively intrinsic to Scotland’s identity: “Each theme is designed to represent what might be called an ‘icon of Scotland’, often of the sort that would be found in museums or arts centres, but equally often such as would not be out of place in the tartan gift shop, on the sports field, the national radio station or the local newsstand.”

Pairings published so far include Burns Night and Up-Helly-Aa, Jenners and The Barras, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Robert Adam, the Forth Bridge and the “Bridge Over the Atlantic”, Billy Bremner and Archie Gemmill, Celtic Connections and the White Heather Club, black bun and Black Bob. Many more unexpected, bizarre but mutually illuminating pairings are still to come. The invited poets remain ignorant of their partners, so that what gathers is an anthology which examines in poems, from a range of different angles, “the interplay between extremes of the nation’s culture”.

One virtue of the project is that it sets its own limitation: it’s intended to last one year, from Burns Day 2016 to spring 2017. There are over 1500 online followers and the number is growing. Online technology is arguably what has made this project possible, though one might imagine a published book coming from it. The excitement and curiosity is most immediate while it’s being enacted, and the book would be a resource to return to later, to dwell upon.

The third example is Peter McCarey’s The Syllabary: <http://www.thesyllabary.com/>: poetry as new technology arising uniquely in the computer era. In 2006, on his website, “The Hyperliterary Exchange”: <http://hyperex.co.uk/reviewsyllabary.php>, Edward Picot defined “hyperliterature” as “literature which makes use of the computerised/digital medium in such a way that it cannot be reproduced in print”. There are animations, sound-effects, nonlinear structures, interactivities, or combinations of these. Picot’s own website: <http://www.edwardpicot.com/> links to other hyperliterature sites.

McCarey described the origins of The Syllabary as a list of monosyllabic words which formed the basis of his elaborations into short, dense and complex lyrical poems. The

priority of syllables as opposed to metrical structures, sonnet or ballad forms for example, abandons rhyme and regulated rhythm for apparently random associations of sound. When you open the site, McCarey says, “The simplest way to visualize what happens when you’re in the programme is to imagine a set of concentric dials on the door of a safe. The outer dial is the initial, the second is the vowel, and the third is the terminal.” The dial turns, the letters form a sound, sometimes a recognisable word, and if there’s a poem behind it, the screen pauses to display it. When there’s a fix on a poem, what looks like an old portable typewriter’s script takes form as you hear the poet’s voice reading it. Then the dials shift again. Visually, the screen is layered with the dials, and then seemingly hand-written words or letter-clusters containing the syllables come and go, horizontally, and fade up into focus or back down to invisibility.

Edward Picot’s conclusion is worth noting: “Igor Stravinsky once wrote that ‘The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees oneself of the chains that shackle the spirit...the arbitrariness of the constraint only serves to obtain precision of execution.’ There are other ways of working, of course: but constraint and process certainly seem to suit McCarey. They have enabled him to produce a work of literature which is experimental, elaborate, simple, mathematically precise and deeply personal all at the same time.”

And perfectly suited to online technology in a way no printed poem, or poem from the oral tradition, has ever been.

Paradoxically, the greatest “futurist” of modern Scottish letters, Edwin Morgan, author of computer poems and hi-tech poem-jinks you’d think online technology was made for, never used a computer: his old typewriter stayed with him pretty much to the end and is now held in the Morgan archive at the Scottish Poetry Library. Yet Morgan knew well enough what the future might portend and in this context, it’s also curious to reflect on the fact that he never published a major scholarly work, neither of literary history nor of close analysis of his favoured authors. He did, however, excel as a literary scholar in another form: the essay. With all the technological resources for information and the movement of data, the purpose of the essay remains an essential method of enquiry, whether in print or online.

Morgan’s *Essays* (1972) and *Crossing the Border: Essays on Scottish Literature* (1990) prompt a final consideration of the essential need for prose criticism, literary, social, historical accounts, from the Enlightenment to contemporary political and literary analysis. Of many valuable works in this area from the 20th and 21st centuries, among the best are the

collection *Scottish Scene: or, the Intelligent Man's Guide to Albion* (1934) by Hugh MacDiarmid and Lewis Grassic Gibbon and "The Voice of Scotland" series of books they commissioned early in that decade, including Victor McClure's *Scotland's Inner Man*, Compton Mackenzie's *Catholicism and Scotland*, Eric Linklater's *The Lion and the Unicorn*, William Power's *Literature and Oatmeal*, Willa Muir's *Mrs Grundy in Scotland* and Edwin Muir's *Scott and Scotland*.

More recently, Neal Ascherson (b. 1932), in *Stone Voices: The Search for Scotland* (2002), continued a tradition of considering literature, the arts, all forms of cultural production in Scotland, in the context of changing social, economic and political conditions. Cairns Craig, general editor of the "determinations" series from Edinburgh University Press from 1987-97, is similarly committed to deep cultural engagement. This series included titles such as Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull's *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture* (1987), *A Claim of Right for Scotland* (1989), edited by Owen Dudley Edwards, and Alexander Broadie's *The Tradition of Scottish Philosophy* (1990). More recently the series of "Companions" to Scottish literature published by Edinburgh University and now the Association for Scottish Literary Studies take the spirit of critical enquiry further.

Angus Calder (1942-2008), historian and poet, was the author of major studies of the Second World War, *The People's War* (1969) and *The Myth of the Blitz* (1990), but his major work was *Revolutionary Empire: The Rise of the English-Speaking Empires from the Fifteenth Century to the 1780s* (1981). This is among the best Scottish books of the 20th century. In it, the responsibilities of the professional historian, an assiduous attention to recovered information about the conditions in which people of all kinds lived their lives, and the priorities of a cultural critic, who knows intimately the value of all the arts in the work of human imagination, are perfectly matched. Many literary critics are committed to the latter, many historians to the former, but few writers have brought them together with such lucidity and power. At over 900 pages, *Revolutionary Empire* is monumental, but never flags. It's one of the very few works to take a comprehensive account of the history of the English-speaking world in an international context which gives as much weight to considering the people of Scotland as it does to the people of more imperial centres of gravity. Calder's books of essays and literary appraisal dealing more closely with Scotland's culture and society bring unique insight and contagious engagement: *Revolving Culture: Notes from the Scottish Republic* (1994) and *Scotlands of the Mind* (2002).

To these names I'd add the less familiar one of Thomas Docherty, author of *Aesthetic Democracy* (2006), *Universities at War* (2014) and *Complicity* (2016) which engage fiercely with questions of philosophy, social purpose and morality. The first of these opens with the proposition: "democracy is impossible in a polity that degrades the arts." The second applies the argument to tertiary educational priorities in a world where financial wealth is the determining force, "that has co-opted its countervailing authority, that of civilization or, tragically, of the university." The third is a devastating analysis of the relation between ethics and contemporary politics, with brilliant analyses of Shakespeare alongside a close reading of Edwin Morgan's poem for the opening of the Scottish parliament in 2004.

The work of Ascherson, Craig, Calder, Docherty and others is another example of a distinctive characteristic of Scotland: the priority, not only of perception, but of participation. Their examples show how the virtues of Scottish literature, like all other literatures and all the arts, are always with the open, never with things fixed, finally formed and closed. If new media excels in immediacy, essayists, historians and critics like these emphasise the necessity for its complement: incisive, reflective, serious thinking.

The online examples of Scottish literature in new media I began with are necessary practice, but they require the complement of the work that essays do. In her seminal book *Artful* (2012), Ali Smith asks: "What is a screen?" And answers: "A thing which divides." But then she asks: "Does an image on a screen form the same kind of surface as words on a page?" The answer to that is more complex.